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CARNIVAL AND CANNIBAL (FIRST CHAPTER)

NECROPOLITICS CAPITALISM, CARNEVAL, GLOBALIZATION, SIMULATION,
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One can start from Marx's famous formula that history first appears as an authentic event and then repeats itself as a farce. Modernity can thus be imagined as the initial adventure of the European West and then as a huge farce that is repeated worldwide, in all latitudes to which Western values – religion, technology, economics and politics – are exported. This “carnivalization” goes through the equally historical stages of evangelization, colonization, decolonization and globalization. What is less seen is that this hegemony, this grip on a world order whose patterns – not only technical and military, but also cultural and ideological – seem irresistible, is accompanied by an extraordinary reversal in which this power is slowly undermined, eaten up and “cannibalized” by those it carnivalizes. This was the case in Recife,

Brazil, in the 19th century, where the bishops who had traveled all the way from Portugal to celebrate their passive conversion were eaten by the Indians – out of excessive evangelical love (cannibalism as an extreme form of hospitality). As the first victims of this evangelical masquerade, the Indians spontaneously go to the limit and beyond: they physically absorb those who have spiritually absorbed them.

It is this carnivalesque and cannibalistic dual form that we see reproduced everywhere on a global scale, with the export of our moral values (human rights, democracy), our principles of economic rationality, growth, performance and spectacle. Everywhere they are adopted with more or less enthusiasm, but in complete ambiguity, by all those peoples who have escaped the good word of the universal, who are “underdeveloped”, i.e. missionary territory and forced conversion to modernity, but much more than exploited and oppressed: mocked, transfigured as a caricature of whites – like those monkeys that used to be paraded at fairs in admiral costumes.

Nevertheless, they show off the white people they think are monkeys. In one way or another, they return this multiplied mockery to those who inflict it on them, they make themselves a living mockery of their masters, as if in a distorting mirror, capturing the whites in their grotesque double – a wonderful example of all this in Jean Rouch’s *Maitres-Fous*, where black workers in the city gather in the forest in the evening to ape and exorcise their Western masters in a kind of trance: the boss, the general, the bus driver. This is not a political act, but a victim-oriented acting-out – the stigmatization of domination through its actual signs.

But one can ask oneself whether these whites, the chief, the policeman, the general, these “original” whites are not already masquerade figures, whether they are not already a caricature of themselves – by merging with their masks. So the whites would have carnivalized themselves and thus cannibalized themselves long before they exported all this to the whole world. It is the great parade of a culture that is seized by a waste of resources and throws itself under the bus: the consumption of itself, for which mass consumption and the consumption of all kinds of goods is the most topical figure. To this farce is added the other dimension of which W. Benjamin spoke, namely that humanity today succeeds in turning its worst alienation into an aesthetic and spectacular pleasure.

This great collective show with which the West attracts not only the remains of all other cultures in its museums, in its fashion and in its art, but also its own remains. Art plays an important role in this: Picasso took the best from “primitive” art, and the African artist today copies Picasso within the framework of an international aesthetic.

That all the peoples adorned with the signs of whiteness and all the techniques from other countries are at the same time the living parody of it, when they are its mockery, means that it is simply ridiculous, but we can no longer see it. In its extension to the whole world, the fraud of universal values is revealed. If there has been a first, historical and Western event of modernity, then we have exhausted its consequences and it has taken a fatal turn for ourselves, a turn towards farce

But the logic of modernity wanted us to impose it on the whole world, that the fate of

whiteness is the fate of the Cain race and that no one escapes this homogenization, this mystification of the species.

When blacks try to make themselves white, they are only the distorted mirror of the neglect by whites who have mystified themselves from the beginning through their own domination. Thus, the entire scene of modern multiracial civilization is but a *trompe l'oeil* universe in which all singularities of race, gender and culture have been distorted until they become a parody of themselves.

Thus, through colonization and decolonization, the entire species parodies and destroys itself in a gigantic dispositif of simulation, of mimetic violence, in which both indigenous and Western cultures are exhausted. For Western culture is in no way triumphant: It has long since lost its soul (Hélé Béji). He has turned himself into a carnivalist and added the ridiculousness of organizing, at great expense, a world museum for the clothes of all cultures.

Taking up Borges' profound parable about the people of the mirrors, in which the vanquished, banished to the other side of the mirrors, are reduced to resemblance, to be only the reflection of their victor? But," says Borges, "little by little they become more and more unlike them, and one day they will move the mirror in the other direction again and put an end to the hegemony of the empire... So, if we consider what is really happening in this global confrontation, we see that the enslaved peoples, far from becoming less and less like their masters – from the depths of their slavery – and taking liberating revenge, have on the contrary begun to become more and more like them, grotesquely mimicking their model by outdoing the signs of their servitude – which is the other kind of revenge – a fatal strategy that cannot be said to be victorious, since it is fatal for both.

It is the whole of whiteness that buries *négritude* under the trains of the carnival. And it is all the *négritude* that absorbs the whiteness in the cannibal's features. Cannibalization versus carnivalization – it seems that through an immense anthropological slip, the entire species has fallen into this masquerade.

This is the paradox of universal values. All the social movements in black society, all this caricature of power and counter-power, all these after-effects of a Western bourgeoisie that in its "historical" coherence would almost take on the value of an original event. Ultimately, modern Western culture should never have broken out of its order, in which it represented a kind of singularity. But it could not, it could not escape this violent extrapolation because it already carried its own negation within itself, simultaneously with its universal affirmation. The recoil of this immense movement is taking place precisely in the form of an accelerated disintegration of the universal. And globalization is nothing other than the theater of this decay – this subsequent farce of history.

The Schwarzenegger-style masquerade can serve as an illustration of every power structure and the functioning of politics itself. It can be analyzed as a caricature of democracy. As a grotesque parody – which, when debunked, maintains the hope of a rational exercise of power. However, if one assumes that power is only sustained by this grotesque simulation and

is in some way a challenge to society rather than its representation, then Bush is the equivalent of Schwarzenegger. What's more, both fulfill their role perfectly and are "the right men in the right place". Not because a country or a people, as the saying goes, has the leaders it deserves, but because they are the emanation of world power as it is. The current political structure of the US literally corresponds to its world domination: Bush rules the US in the same way that it exercises its hegemony over the rest of the planet – so there is no reason to imagine an alternative (one could even argue that the rule of one world power is a reflection of the absolute privilege of the human species over all others).

This is the paradox of power. And we need to say goodbye once and for all to the illusion, very may 68, but basically an idea of enlightenment, imagination or intelligence in power (one should all "Enjoy without hindrance!" – all this has occurred, hyper-realized "without obstacles", through the pure and simple evolution of the system).

Everything depends on what conception one has of power. If the prerequisite is intelligence in power, then the persistence, even the permanence of stupidity in power is inexplicable (yet the few historical examples of intelligence in power show that it usually enters the ways of stupidity very quickly). So it would rather be proof that stupidity is somewhere among the attributes of power, that it is a functional privilege of power. Perhaps this function goes back to the age-old function of having to take over the cursed part of the social, which includes stupidity – which would take us back to the "power dolls" of primitive societies and explain why the most narrow-minded and unimaginative last the longest in them.

It would also perhaps shed light on the general willingness of the population to delegate their sovereignty to the most inoffensive, oligocophal of their fellow citizens. It is a kind of evil genius that leads people to vote for someone dumber than themselves – out of wariness of a responsibility that is always distrusted as soon as it is imposed from above, and out of secret schadenfreude at witnessing the spectacle of the stupidity and corruption of the men in power. Only through a superhuman effort, as opposed to the democratic illusions of the Enlightenment, can one bring oneself to choose the best, and that is why citizens, especially in turbulent times, will flock to the one who does not require them to think. It is a kind of silent incantation, analogous in the political sphere to the conspiracy of art in another realm. In this way, from a completely different angle, Bush fulfills all the roles. On the one hand, Bin Laden declares that he needs Mr. Bush's stupidity and therefore desires his re-election. On the other hand, a majority of Americans want someone in the White House whose stupidity and banality is a surety for their own conformism. The dumber he is, the less they will feel personally stupid.

In this "stupid" and hereditary capacity, power is a virtual configuration that absorbs every element and metabolizes it in its favor. It can be made up of countless intelligent particles, but this will not change its opaque structure – it is like a body that changes its cells without ceasing to be the same. Thus, every molecule of the American nation will soon come from elsewhere, as if through a blood transfusion. America will have become black, Indian, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, without ceasing to be America. In fact, the less "authentic" it is, the more mythically American it will be. And it will be all the more fundamentalist the less of a

foundation it has (if it ever had one, since even the Founding Fathers came from outside). And all the more fundamentalist the more multiracial and multicultural it has become in practice. And all the more imperialistic when it is ruled by the descendants of slaves. That's the way it is. This is paradoxical, but it refutes the thesis of the conceit of power.

It is power itself that must be abolished, not only in the refusal to be dominated – which is the essence of all traditional struggles – but just as much and just as violently in the refusal to dominate. For domination implies both, and if the refusal to dominate had the same violence, the same energy as the refusal to be dominated, we would have stopped dreaming of a revolution a long time ago. This also makes it clear why the intelligentsia cannot be in power and never will be: Because it consists precisely of this double refusal. “If I could imagine that there were a few men in the world without any power, then I would know that nothing is lost.” (Canetti).

With the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as Governor of California, we find ourselves in the middle of the masquerade, where politics is just a game of idols and fans. This is a giant step towards the end of the representative system. And that is the doom of today's politics – that everywhere those who bet on the spectacle will perish by the spectacle. And that applies to both “citizens” and politicians. That is the inherent justice of the media. Do you want power through images? Then you will perish from the reproduction of images. The carnival of the image is also self-cannibalization through the image

Apart from that, one should not be too quick to draw conclusions about the decline of political mores in the USA from Schwarzenegger's election. Behind this masquerade lies a far-reaching political strategy that was certainly not deliberate (that would require too much intelligence) and which paradoxically refutes our critical analyses and our eternal democratic illusions. By electing Schwarzenegger, nor in the falsified election of Bush in 2000), in this hallucinating parody of all systems of representation, America is taking revenge in its own way for the symbolic contempt shown towards it. In this way, it is proving its imaginary power, because in this flight forward into the democratic masquerade, in this nihilistic enterprise of the liquidation of values and total simulation, even more than in the field of finance and weapons, no one can hold a candle to it, and it will be several steps ahead of it for a long time to come. This extreme, empirical and technical form of mockery and desecration of values, this radical obscenity and total godlessness of an otherwise “religious” people is the secret of its global hegemony. This is what fascinates everyone, this is what we enjoy, even through the rejection and sarcasm of this phenomenal vulgarity, of a universe (politics, television) that has finally been brought back to the zero point of culture. I say this without irony and with admiration: in this way, through radical simulation, America dominates the rest of the world, to which it serves as a model, and at the same time takes revenge on the rest of the world, which is symbolically infinitely superior to it. America's challenge is that of a desperate simulation, a masquerade that it imposes on the rest of the world, to the point of a desperate simulacrum of military power. The carnivalization of power. And this challenge cannot be accepted: We have neither a goal nor a counter-finality to oppose it.

In this sense, we need to revisit the successive phases of this global masquerade of power. First of all, it is the West in general which, in the name of universality, imposes its political and

economic models and its principle of technical rationality on the whole world. But that is not all of its poisoning and domination. Beyond economics and politics, world power today asserts itself in the grip of simulation, a functioning simulation of all values and cultures. This power no longer asserts itself through the export of techniques, values and ideologies, but through the universal extrapolation of a parody of these values (democracy is universalized in a cartoonish, ridiculous form – it is the simulation of development and growth on which the “underdeveloped” countries rely, the peoples threatened with extinction are directed towards the falsified, Disneyfied return of their culture – all are fascinated by a universal model whose first victim is America, although it hopes to reap its benefits).

It is their lives and deaths that the terrorists are risking, and at the highest price. We (the West) deliberately sacrifice everything that gives a person some value in their own eyes. Our potlatch is the potlatch of unworthiness, of shamelessness, of obscenity, of humiliation, of baseness. That’s the whole movement of our culture – that’s the area where we drive up the commandments. Our truth is always on the side of revelation, desublimation, reductive analysis – it is the truth of the repressed, of exhibition, of confession, of exposure – nothing is true unless it is desacralized, objectified, stripped of its aura, dragged onto the stage. Our potlatch is the potlatch of indifference – indifference to values, but also indifference to ourselves. If we cannot bring our own death into play, then we are already dead. And it is this indifference and baseness that we present to others as a challenge: the challenge to degrade ourselves in return, to deny our own values, to expose ourselves, to confess – in short, to respond with a nihilism that is equal to our own.

We may try to wrest all this from them by force, the shame in the prisons of Abu Ghraib, the veil in the schools, but that is not enough to comfort us about our baseness, they must come to it on their own, they must sacrifice themselves on the altar of obscenity, transparency, pornography and global simulation. They should lose their symbolic defense and take the path of liberal order, comprehensive democracy and integrated spectacle on their own.

On this point, I fully agree with Boris Groys’1 hypothesis of the double potlatch: the Western potlatch of nothingness, self-abasement, shame and mortification, juxtaposed with the potlatch of death. But is this a genuine symbolic response to the terrorists’ challenge? We are not talking about war or the fight “against evil”, which are themselves an admission of complete helplessness to respond symbolically to the challenge of death. We are talking about the West deliberately sacrificing all its values, everything that gives a being or a culture any value in its own eyes. Il sacrificio della dignità fondamentale, dell’ pudore, dell’ honore... a neantization of the self, a disenchantment, a self-prostitution thrown at the Other as a weapon of massive deterrence – a dizzying seduction by the void, a challenge to the Other (Islam, but also the rest of the world) to prostitute itself in return, to unveil itself, to spit out all its secrets and lose all sovereignty – that is, that of death par excellence

If this is a giant auto-da-fé – in which case it could be understood as a symbolic response in the form of a mutual challenge. Potlatch against potlatch – does one betray the other? One might think that one is a potlatch in excess (that of death) and the other a potlatch in deficiency (that of self-irony and shame). In this case, they are not exactly opposite each other, and one would have to speak of an asymmetrical potlatch. Or ... or are we to think (and thus in

a way agree with Boris Groys) that ultimately no form, not even that of the challenge of death, of extreme sacrifice, can be considered superior, and thus the terrorist challenge superior to the reverse Western challenge? It seems, however, that the West is not in a position, as is the rule of potlatch, to respond on an equal footing, to death with death, and above all not in a position to surpass, to respond beyond – for what is there beyond death? But it is conceivable that at the highest level, at the peak of confrontation, a more comprehensive, even more radical form of reversibility plays out, which means that no form, not even the highest, escapes reversal, victorious replacement by another – as in the game of rock, scissors and blade. Even the most extreme, the most sublime that we can imagine is taken up again and surpassed by another form – perhaps even by its opposite or its caricature. That's the way it is. That is the game. The game is never over.

That said, the idea that a world power, which is after all a form of self-degradation and universal debasement, can nevertheless represent a power of challenge, of response to the challenge from the other world – that is, ultimately, a symbolic power – is for me a heartbreaking revision, a weighing up of what I have always thought (whose horizon has always been the revolt and ultimate victory of the “peoples of the mirror”). But perhaps one must come to terms with the fact that even reversibility as a massive weapon of seduction is not the absolute weapon, but is confronted with something irreversible.

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